Sex and the Eskimo

by

Clark M. Garber

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Among some Eskimos, wife-trading and wife-lending are practiced. Occasionally, one man may have several wives.—Ewing Galloway.

wife. This situation really puzzled me. Immediately I searched out the village chief and demanded an explanation.

The old chief explained that this was an annual celebration in which every man lived with another man's wife for a period of ten days.

The purpose was not sex relations. In fact, sex relations were strictly prohibited and any one who overstepped the bounds was dealt with severely. The actual function of this celebration, according to Chief Pooloozak, was a demonstration of friendship and trust to show that their people honored each other's home and family.

Inquiry among other village chiefs disclosed this to be a rather common celebration. Had I not been acquainted with the people of this village I probably would not have recognized the situation.

Among the well-established Eskimo colonies a chief of one village who is visiting the chief of another village is always loaned a woman for the duration of his visit. If more than one chief comes, a consort is furnished for each.

It may be difficult for the reader to correlate the Eskimos' apparent sex freedom with their acute sense of jealousy. Both men and women are jealous, but the men, in some cases, are much more jealous than their wives. After a wife is acquired and children are born, the husband jealously guards the chastity of his wife and will even kill another man who violates his wife and home.

The primary object of these articles has been to bring to light the primitive customs and practices of the Eskimo people. To the reader, the material may seem to be contradictory in some respects. The facts stated herein, however, have been acquired through a careful and conscientious investigation of the ethnology of the Eskimos.

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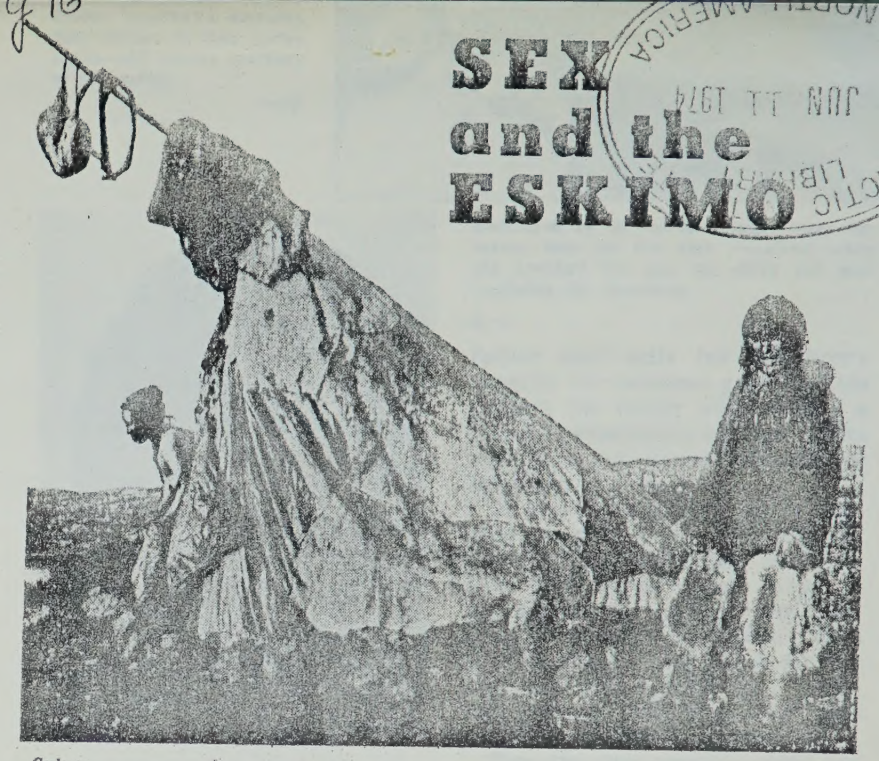

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SEX and the ESKIMO

Culver

by Clark M. Garber

A first-hand account of unusual customs of a culture which is rapidly changing under the impact of white civilization.

THE customs, traditions and sex mores of the primitive Eskimo are rapidly succumbing to the white race. With the exception of some of the more isolated settlements, it is becoming impossible to get a true understanding of their way of life, their beliefs and traditions.

There are many tribal groups of the Eskimo, which is not, incidentally, the name by which they know themselves. They call themselves *Innuit* and the home in which they live is not an igloo, but an *innie*.

A student of the Eskimos must have a fundamental knowledge of their language. Otherwise he would be unable to distinguish one group from another, since their tribal demarcation has virtually disappeared except for language differences.

Introduction to sex knowledge begins very early in the life of the Eskimo. This is because the entire

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family lives in a single room, about twelve feet square. Hence, even the small child witnesses the sex relations of its parents.

Actually, the parents make little or no effort to conceal such activities from the eyes of curious youngsters. And, since small children, in their play, imitate all the activities witnessed in the home, it is not uncommon to find them imitating their parents' sex relations.

Mimicry of their parents' sex activities during their play is just as important to them as imitating other household activities.

At approximately eleven years, the Eskimo boy arrives at the age of puberty; girls experience their first menstruation at the age of eleven to thirteen years. To the parents this means that their son has become a man and their daughter has attained womanhood.

Parents are anxious to get their daughters married off since it means additional support for them. It is more or less an obligation of the son-in-law to contribute to the support of his wife's parents.

Among certain Eskimo colonies, when a girl arrives at the first indication of womanhood, lines are tattooed on her chin to indicate to all the young men that she has arrived at the marriageable age.

It is also customary for the girl's father to spread the news among the young hunters that his daughter has experienced her first menstruation and is now available for marriage.

Even though the girl of eleven or twelve years has begun to menstruate, it is often found that her organs of reproduction are insufficiently matured to permit husband and wife relations.

In one remote area several instances were discovered in which the girl's mother, by manual manipulations, prepared her daughter for copulation in order that complete satisfaction could be assured for the prospective husband.

Regardless of the early preparations for mating, it rarely takes place immediately following puberty. In one particular village there were a number of unwed boys and girls over eighteen years of age.

However, in this village the number of children born out of wedlock was considerable. In cases of this kind it was felt necessary to use special persuasion to induce them to go to a passing ship where they could be formally married by the captain. In other instances, they were taken before the Territorial Commissioner for the ceremony.

Licentiousness can in no manner be linked with the primitive Eskimo's freedom of sex relations, which was based on adaptation to the conditions of their harsh and rugged life.

However, the coming of the white man brought corruption to the Eskimos' instinctive reactions to sex stimuli. Then they, especially the women, quickly discovered the great improvement in their offspring when begotten by crossing their blood with that of the white man.

Consequently, it became a great desire on the part of many Eskimo women, even though married to a man of their own race, to have a child by a white man. And, of course, a certain type of white man was quick to take advantage of this situation.

Consequently, in almost every Eskimo village children with Eskimo mothers and white fathers may be found.

Widows were more inclined to be free in their sex relations than young unmarried women. Even though the widow might bear a child or two during her widowhood, she was not thereby barred from subsequent marriage.

In case the man she was going to marry did not want her illegitimate children, she gave them away to childless couples who were happy to have them regardless of their parentage.

In this connection, it might be said that the widow did not carry on illicit sex relations by her own choice. Primitive custom and tradition exerted a powerful influence. Consequently the widow was often forced into prostitution against her own convictions.

There is one type of Eskimo father who sells his daughter's chastity for personal gain. On this subject the writer will recount a personal experience which left him with deep and genuine disgust for this kind of parent.

Eskimo mothers carrying their babies in their parka hoods—*All photos courtesy of the author.*

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Matriarch of an Eskimo village. Note the tattoo lines on her chin, received when she reached the age at which she was available for marriage.

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It was a very cold arctic evening when I arrived with my dog team in the little village of Tuliksak. The thermometer, which I always carried on my dog sled, registered fifty-five below zero. Shortly after I had cared for my dogs and had become well established in the little trail cabin, this unsavory incident occurred.

Tap, tap, tap, came a timid rap upon the cabin door. After putting flame to the tallow candle which I had placed nearby, I shouted, "Come in!"

Slowly the door opened on its creaking, frost-covered hinges and in walked Choonuk, the only Eskimo in the village who could express himself in Eskimo-American jargon. As Choonuk warmed his hands over the pot-belly stove, he remarked, "It is a very cold night for one's friend, Atanak, to be sleeping alone."

"Sure is a very cold night, Choonuk, but Atanak has a very good eiderdown sleeping bag which never fails to keep him warm," was my reply.

"Atanak should sleep with a warm, young body beside him to

add comfort and joy to his bed," continued Choonuk.

"Atanak's body is still young and warm with life. He will not suffer from the cold," I answered, wondering how soon Choonuk would get to the real purpose of his visit. This was soon revealed.

"Choonuk's daughter has now seen seventeen winters. She is healthy and warm and would make Atanak a very cozy bed partner."

"Choonuk is very kind to offer his daughter to me as a bed partner for the night," I told him, "but that would be a very wrong thing to do and cannot be accepted."

I might say that there were many additional reasons beside moral scruples that prohibited such an arrangement. In the first place, I knew that the girl was infested with lice. It was doubtful that she had ever had a bath, except perhaps a urine wash, since she was born.

The real purpose of Choonuk's offer, I knew, was not the slightest interest in my comfort or welfare. To lead him on and discover his price for the accommodation he offered, I asked, "What would Atanak have to pay for such an arrangement?"

"One has need for sugar, tobacco, coffee, flour, cartridges and a few other things," he replied.

"Is it possible that Choonuk is too lazy to hunt and trap so he might have furs with which to buy the things he needs at the trading post?" I retorted with heat. "Now Choonuk will get out of here before Atanak gets real angry and throws him out. And remember, if Atanak hears of Choonuk trying this dirty game on some other traveler, he will be in plenty of trouble."

This is not an isolated case of an Eskimo father trying to sell his daughter's chastity for personal gain. Many travelers have related similar experiences.

While translating and compiling two volumes of Eskimo legends and stories I was somewhat amazed to find how many of their stories were based on sexual exploits. In general, their folktales mention sex activities as commonplace adventures.

Polygamous marriages (where the husband has more than one wife) are not uncommon among the Eskimos but, for the most part, their marriages are monogamous. However, a chief, a witch doctor, or an expert hunter may become affluent to such a degree that—to uphold his prestige and demonstrate his importance — he must have a second or even a third wife. Each of his wives bears children, or he may favor only one of them.

If a man's wife should prove to be barren, or if she should bear only female children, it becomes his privilege to take a second wife for child-bearing purposes.

During her period of fertility, an Eskimo woman may bear as many as ten or twelve children, of which number possibly four or five may reach adulthood. In the very remote areas, where primitive colonies of Eskimos may be found, the infant mortality rate is appalling, often attaining seventy-five per cent.

A much less common form of polygamy, polyandry (where one woman has a number of husbands), has also been known to exist among the primitive Eskimos. A number of cases of this type of marital arrangement came to my knowledge.

Wars, pestilence or epidemics have been known to reduce the female population to a point where there were not enough women to provide each man with a wife. Particularly after a war party had raided a village and the women, especially the young ones, had been carried away, might such a shortage of females occur.

In such cases, some of the older women who were left became the wives of two to four men each. This arrangement was necessary from the standpoint of survival. Of course a child was occasionally born to a polyandrous marriage, but it was impossible for any one of the woman's husbands to claim paternal rights in such cases.

As my life with the primitive Eskimos became more and more intimate, I gained a greater and more sympathetic understanding of their way of life, their beliefs and their almost hopeless battle for existence.

Their transition from the Mongolian to the Eskimo, over a period of perhaps thirty thousand years, brought about a genuine adaptation both physically and culturally.

Theirs was the most difficult environment in which to survive. My admiration and respect for these primitive people I cannot disclaim.

Part 2

THE young Eskimo does not depend entirely upon sex attraction to determine which girl he desires to marry.

If marriageable girls are plentiful, the young hunter will casually go to the homes of all these girls in the village and pretend to visit with their fathers. At the same time he will slyly watch the girls at work.

When he has observed all the girls of marriage age in the village, he then returns to the home of the one he has found to be the best worker. There, he makes known to the girl's father that he has chosen the daughter to be his wife.

However, this does not consummate the arrangement. Now the girl's father realizes he has some bargaining power. Since the young hunter has acquired very little property, the father offers his daughter for marriage in exchange

for two or three years of the young man's services as the family hunter.

Thereupon, the young man takes his bride to his dwelling, some distance from the village. There the honeymoon takes place.

In reality, it is a trial marriage. If, within the period of his servitude, he finds his wife to be a poor housekeeper and above all, if no child is born to them, he may return his wife to her parents, thereby divorcing her. But, if a child is born, the marriage is thereby consummated.

This trial marriage practice implies that there are plenty of girls from which to choose a bride. In some villages there may be an excess of female childbirths, in which case many of them are destroyed at birth. (This is known as *infanticide.*) In this manner the community endeavors to establish a balance between male and female.

Many villages apparently found this to be a poor system. At one time the writer received word from the chief of a large village on St. Lawrence Island requesting that he send a hundred or more mariageable girls. There, infanticide had been carried to an extreme. Consequently, many of the young men in this village were doomed to bachelorhood.

Infanticide is not only employed to control the number of females. Children who are born deformed, whether male or female, are promptly destroyed.

With but one exception, I have never found a crippled Eskimo child. In the village of Tanunak there were two Eskimo boys hopping about the village on their knees with their legs and feet drawn up against their buttocks. Had it not been for the influence of a missionary they would have been destroyed at birth.

After marriage is consummated by birth of a child, it is a fairly permanent relationship between man and woman. But the bonds of marriage are broken as easily as they are made. If a man chooses to leave his wife because she does not bear children or because she makes his life miserable he may send her back to her parents or he may simply expel her from his dwelling.

It is rather common for a woman who is growing old without offspring constantly to nag about little things of no consequence. Naturally, her husband cannot return her to her parents because they are probably no longer living. Therefore, he simply expels her from his dwelling and leaves her to make her way as best she can.

But the fault is not always with the wife. The husband sometimes turns out to be the mean one. Then the wife may chase him out and take over the home, especially if she has children.

Allow me to note here that the broken marriage is far less frequent among the Eskimos than among the peoples of the white race. An Eskimo man who marries a woman and has children by her will endure much nagging and scolding before he finds it expedient to divorce the mother of his children. Also, a mother will endure much abuse before she will leave her husband and children.

To make her husband happy, the wife must bear him mostly male children. But, nature does not always oblige the mother in this respect. In this case, the husband may relegate his first wife to the menial tasks about the home and take another woman for child bearing purposes. In fact, the husband is not confined to one or two wives. He may have as many as he wishes so long as he is able to support them and keep them from fighting.

The legends and stories of the Eskimo are virtually replete with references to divorce, multiple wives, multiple husbands, sex exploits, childbirth and death. These sexual affairs and all other matters of importance to them eventually became a part of their folklore which in turn can be called the history of the Eskimo people.

Naturally, their legends and stories are passed down from generation to generation by the spoken word. Consequently, many of them have little resemblance to the original incident. Nevertheless, a careful study of their legends brings to light many matters of historical importance.

Perhaps inbreeding is the cause for the decline of the Eskimo race. When they first settled in the Arctic regions of North America, they were a much stronger people with greater skills and a more artistic workmanship. This fact may be easily discerned by a study of the tools and products made by their ancient ancestors.

There are four cases on record in which fathers married their own daughters and children were born therefrom. Likewise, many cases of marriage between first cousins are a matter of record.

Frankly, such close inbreeding as brothers marrying their sisters, etc. was distasteful to, and frowned upon by, the Eskimos. But in their isolation and their small colonies there was no other solution for their mating instinct. As a result their stature, intelligence and skills have retrogressed since they landed on the shores of Bering Strait in Alaska.

Celibacy is sometimes found among the Eskimos—but not as a matter of choice. Occasionally, a dire shortage of women occurs, because of their practice of infanticide, as mentioned earlier.

When this happens, some of the weaker men are forced into celibacy while the strong ones take the few women that may be available. Their stories and legends frequently mention this type of situation. Celibacy has also been forced upon them by marauding bands of enemy warriors who have captured and carried off their women.

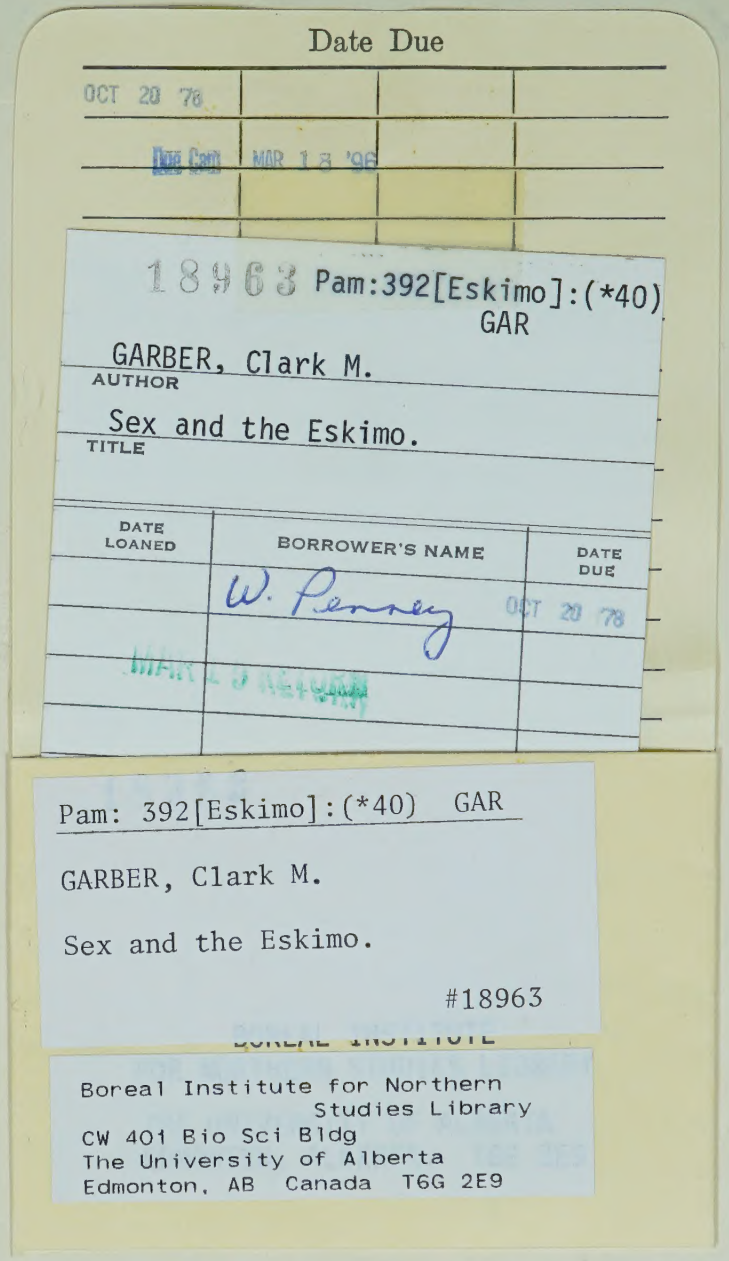
Perhaps one of the most interesting marital customs of the primitive Eskimo is their practice of wife-trading. It may take place as an amusement, as a matter of deference and hospitality for a distinguished visitor, or there may be a practical reason for the custom.

Murdock found wife-trading a common practice among the Point Barrow Eskimos. He states one instance as follows, "One man of our acquaintance planned to go deer hunting and borrowed his cousin's wife for the trip."

No amount of persuasion is required for this arrangement. It is a practical solution to a problem. The borrowed wife is a good hunter and very skillful in the care of meat and skins. If, after a time, it is found that the trade is very advantageous to both parties, it then becomes permanent.

This is not an isolated example of wife-trading. I have known it to happen on many, many occasions.

In one of the very primitive villages I visited, I found not a single husband living with his own



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